

Book Reading: *Homeland Maternity* by Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz

Holly Patch

On June 17, 2019, Prof. Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz (The University of Iowa) held a reading from her recently published monograph *Homeland Maternity: US Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime* (University of Illinois Press, 2019) at the Eulenspiegel bookstore in Bielefeld, Germany. Prof. Tomke König (Sociology of Gender; IZG) presented the larger context of Natalie's two-week stay as an international guest lecturer (IGD-Programm) at Bielefeld University. Research associate Holly Patch (Sociology of Gender; IZG) then introduced Natalie to a diverse and full house. Sebastian Reeck of the Eulenspiegel collective provided a warm atmosphere for members of the broader public of Bielefeld to come together with local and international scholars to engage in critical, rigorous discussion of the politically relevant topic of Natalie's research: "homeland maternity." She has developed this term in theorizing how "motherhood and nation are deeply enmeshed and mutually constitutive" (3).

Her reading cleverly mirrored the structure of her book: she eased her audience into conversation by presenting two brief anecdotes representing homeland maternity and then guided us in teasing out the complex discursive entanglements of motherhood and nation within homeland security culture. Before diving into her rhetorical analysis, the communications studies scholar first traced the long history of the relationship between motherhood and nation in the US context, from the founding of the US republic to the era of slavery, the postwar era, and up into the 20th century, focusing on the ways maternal and reproductive labor have been regulated by racial domination, sexual violence, immigration policies, campaigns and technologies of birth control and sterilization, and traditional norms around femininity and domesticity.

Bringing us to the more recent past, Natalie gave examples of reproductive injustice happening now in the US. Her analysis allows us to see that these are material effects conditioned by homeland security state discourse. Chapter by chapter, she shows how the rhetorics of security, risk, emergency, and crisis play out in specific case studies. For the reading, she concentrated on risk, ultimately showing us how "female personhood is often eclipsed or subsumed by that of the fetus and/or child." Despite the fact that "institutional inequities such as poverty, racism, environmental toxins, and inaccessible or insufficient health care" present the biggest threats to fetal health, Natalie's analysis of homeland maternity reveals how states see and target pregnant individuals, and disproportionately "low-income women, immigrant women, and women of color," as the perpetrators of harm (80). Furthermore, she articulated how these rhetorics are not limited to institutional discourse; they are also to be found in the "commonplace" criticisms people make of pregnant women's behavior. Therefore, when turning to potential ways we might start to "subvert or coopt or undermine homeland maternity," she encouraged the audience to begin with a reflection of the "words that we speak and how we participate in public debates over pregnancy, reproduction, and parenting." Our words matter, too.



Photo: Holly Patch

Natalie spoke about current examples of devastating weaponization of homeland maternity by the Trump administration in its routine separation of undocumented families at the US-Mexico border. While she does not dispute the public's outrage and rallying around "families belong together," she does take on the question of what is going on in this discourse as it is being taken up by mainstream media. She argues that "with homeland maternity as critical heuristic, we are compelled to critique not only the role of the carceral state left largely unexamined here but also the specificity of the *gendered* and *reproductive* state violence enacted in this moment" (144, emphasis in original). Decidedly grounded in an ethic of reproductive justice and in its bringing together of "feminist studies of maternal and reproductive politics and critical scholarship on homeland security culture," (3-4) Natalie's homeland maternity provides a necessary and nuanced framework for naming and understanding complex, urgent events around reproductive politics today.

As with her research, during the Q&A discussion, Natalie was able to pull from both her scholarly and activist work in reproductive justice to provide thoughtful responses to articulate questions by audience members. The discussion centered on the various struggles around reproduction, motherhood, security, and nationalism in both the US and German contexts, at state and federal levels, as well as transnationally. What role does the religious right play in this; how do frameworks of morality or neoliberal demands on women constitute the subject of mother; to what extent could this analysis be applied to the German context; how aware is the general public of the reproductive injustices happening; what are possible modes for intervention; what activist work is being done; what can we do? These were some of the questions stimulated by Natalie's reading that made for an invigorating evening of exchange.

Fixmer-Oraiz, Natalie. 2019. *Homeland Maternity: U.S. Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime*. Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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